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US POLICY TOWARD KOREA

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Recent events indicate that Korea is at a key juncture in its history. In broad terms, there are five alternative futures for Korea. First, the status quo of hostility can remain. A second scenario, anticipated by many optimistic observers in both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the West, is a Southern-style peaceful reunification in which the North is gradually transformed and absorbed by the South. A third alternative, envisioned by North Korea, is a "one-nation, two-systems" reunification, followed by an eventual complete "Northern-style" integration. Fourth, it is possible that in the future Korea will experience another major war. Finally, it is conceivable that the DPRK and ROK will shun reunification, but eventually will be able to coexist as friendly neighboring nation-states. The future may evolve in sequential stages; for example, an extended period of two friendly nation-states which is eventually followed by a "Southern-style" reunification. This study analyzes the different scenarios and US policy options, and concludes that a modified military presence and reliance upon South Korea for the lead role in relations with North Korea is an appropriate strategy for an America that is confronted with numerous other global and domestic concerns.

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PREFACE

In this paper, “South Korea” is used as a synonym for “Republic of Korea (ROK).” Likewise, “North Korea” is used interchangeably with “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).” No particular significance is to be construed by the use of any of these terms.

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US POLICY TOWARD KOREA

The site of one of the Cold War's early defining events; the Korean peninsula is one of its few remaining vestiges. Yet, particularly with the June 2000 summit between the North and South Korean leaders, there are indications that Korea is also at a key juncture in its history and that the next few years will be significantly different from the previous fifty. Changes on the Korean peninsula will both shape and be shaped by US security strategy, and the question for US policy makers is whether the US should attempt to craft the Korean future and, if so, how this should best be accomplished. The alternative is to drift along and attempt to react to events as they unfold.

In broad terms, there are five alternative futures for Korea. First, the status quo can remain for an extended period; essentially, this consists of a primarily hostile relationship between two adversarial states that are technically still at war. A second scenario, anticipated by many optimistic observers in both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the West, is a Southern-style peaceful reunification in which the North is gradually transformed and absorbed by the South. A third alternative is that officially advanced by North Korea, which entails a "one-nation, two-systems" reunification, followed by an eventual complete "Northern-style" integration. Fourth, it is possible that in the future Korea will experience another major war. Finally, it is conceivable that the DPRK and ROK will shun reunification, but eventually will be able to coexist as friendly neighboring nation-states. It is certainly possible, perhaps even likely, that the future will evolve in sequential stages; for example, an extended period of two friendly nation-states which is eventually followed by a "Southern-style" reunification.

US military policy options amidst this range of alternative futures includes the following. First, the US could maintain its present military strategy, which includes a sizeable deterrent force in Korea focused upon the possibility of another Korean War, with a strong reliance upon the ROK-US alliance. A second approach would be to modify the US presence significantly, with less emphasis upon a Korean conflict and more upon regional stability; in effect, Korea would be a platform for projecting forces to other parts of Asia as necessary. Finally, a third perspective would argue for the removal of virtually all of the US military forces from the Korean peninsula.

Diplomatic alternatives fall into five main approaches: engaging North Korea; isolating North Korea; essentially delegating to South Korea the responsibility for taking the lead role regarding relations with the DPRK; pursuing a permanent solution through the United Nations; and withdrawal from involvement on the peninsula. As regards US interaction with South

Korea, economic choices essentially are whether the US should pursue a free trade approach for economic benefit, or whether to accept ROK protectionism in order to subsidize South Korea's military and economic growth. It might be viewed as progress that there are now economic choices to be made regarding North Korea, however limited; primarily, these choices consist of levels of humanitarian aid and fledgling investment opportunities.

This study will analyze the five future scenarios and different policy approaches identified above, to clarify relevant issues and identify the implications of action (or inaction). It should be emphasized that the alternative constructs are extreme portrayals, and that actual events may entail a blend of two or more.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

In general terms, the different futures that might await Korea are as follows:

SCENARIO 1: STATUS QUO
SCENARIO 2: SOUTHERN-STYLE REUNIFICATION
SCENARIO 3: NORTHERN-STYLE REUNIFICATION
SCENARIO 4: KOREAN WAR, PART II
SCENARIO 5: TWO FRIENDLY NATION-STATES

TABLE 1. ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FOR KOREA

SCENARIO 1: STATUS QUO

Relations between North Korea and its adversaries have cooled since the June 2000 summit, and are beginning to revert to previous patterns. A distinctly plausible scenario for the future is an essentially hostile relationship, moderated by periodic short-lived thaws. In this status quo scenario, however, the fundamental nature of the situation would not significantly change. That is, the relationship between North and South Korea will be one of mistrust and enmity.

North Korea's negotiating style engenders a cycle of "frustration—initial contact—hope—impasse—frustration."¹ This can be viewed as coldly calculating to extract the greatest possible concessions in a negotiating session, or it may be reflective of reluctance on the part of North Korea when it fears that things may be going too far. Some critics, particularly in the US, argue that North Korea's negotiating style is tantamount to blackmail, particularly when it flaunts its nuclear or missile cards.

A favorite pattern of North Korea is to solicit aid, loans, or weapons from a provider, and to milk the source for all it is worth. The DPRK successfully played the USSR and China off each other for decades, using its favor as leverage. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this game became unfeasible, and the loss of willing sponsors is a major reason for its economic hardships since the early 1990s. In part, this may partially explain North Korea's recent diplomatic initiatives that resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations with some twenty other countries since 2000. This creates a bigger pool in which to go "chump fishing." It is worth noting that, to the North Koreans, what the US would view as "aid" is perceived by them as "tribute," or an entitlement that should be provided to them as a result of their importance. The DPRK views this "tribute" as a vindication of its "Army-first politics" which have given North Korea a position of strength in the international community.

Many in South Korea and the United States expected that rapid progress would continue after the North-South summit, because the leaders of both countries would be leaving office before long (Clinton in January 2002 and Kim Dae Jung in February 2003). They would be disappointed, however, because to the North Koreans the key time consideration is the reign of Kim Jong II, not the terms of office for the temporary ROK and US leaders.

One of Korea's historical and geographical realities is that it is the center of what has been called "the strategic triangle" with Japan, China, and Russia forming the three sides. (This can also be termed the "strategic square" if the United States is viewed as the fourth, seaward leg.) In the status quo scenario, we will not expect to see significant differences in the roles of the other major players. Japan and South Korea maintain a fairly amicable relationship on the surface; there is still deep-rooted mutual resentment, however. The relationship between North Korea and Japan is even more frigid.² Normalization talks between the two countries have made little progress, and particularly since the June 2000 summit Japan is North Korea's primary propaganda target. For its part, Japan is concerned about North Korea's missile program and para-military incursions by North Korea over the years. These operations are believed by the Japanese to have resulted in the kidnapping of up to 10 Japanese citizens (such allegations are, of course, denied by North Korea). More recently, the Japanese have had at least two small naval engagements with suspected North Korean special operations boats—with one being sunk in December 2001. It is worth noting that the apparent purpose of the North Korean boats recently has been to smuggle drugs into Japan; drugs are an effective weapon to subvert North Korea's enemies and are also a source of hard currency.

In general, Japan is both cautious of North Korea and willing to try for improved relations with it. There is, however, an increasing public frustration in Japan and a growing unwillingness

to tolerate North Korea's provocations. Japan and South Korea, although being economic competitors, seem capable of continuing their long journey to warmer relations.

China is opposed to a large US military presence in Korea, and remains North Korea's main patron. It is clear that economic ties with South Korea are more important to Beijing than anything North Korea has to offer. China is satisfied with the status quo of a divided peninsula, and probably contributes to stability by dissuading North Korea from conducting acts of aggression. In fact, China's influence may be a greater factor for North Korea's restraint than is America's relatively modest troop presence on the peninsula. Russia has similar strategic interests to China's, and believes it can play an "honest broker" role between the two Koreas.

The status quo scenario remains compelling in part because of a process of elimination. As we will see, significant obstacles exist with all of the other scenarios, which make all of them unlikely in the foreseeable future. From a power politics perspective, other nations in the region prefer the certainty of a status quo to the uncertainty of a strong and unified Korea, and none of the other nations want to see another war. While not opposed to reunification, the United States would greatly prefer the status quo to another war on the peninsula. Cordial steps notwithstanding, North Korea seems unable to relinquish its long-held view that South Korea's government is illegitimate.³ Many in South Korea are increasingly frustrated with a perceived lack of reciprocity to the "Sunshine Policy" and have doubts about the economic burden that reunification would bring. Some South Koreans would demand acknowledgement, apology, and accountability for past North Korean provocations such as the 1983 Rangoon bombing and the 1987 bombing of a Korean Airlines passenger jet. North Korea's response would be (1) the South should not dredge up the past and (2) the North was not responsible for these events, anyway.

The simple fact that reunification would be a zero sum game for political power holders in the two Koreas provides a disincentive to depart from the status quo.⁴ Finally, a major argument that the status quo will persist is that the North Korean regime has proven remarkably resilient, with little inclination to change its nature. The most likely period for its collapse would seem to have been during the period following Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. Kim Jong Il has completed the transition, and the regime will be reluctant to make too many dramatic changes after witnessing the results of reforms in the former Warsaw Pact. For North Korea's *nomenklatura*, the status quo is preferable to an uncertain future; despite the abysmal conditions suffered by others in the country, the DPRK's power elite is currently faring quite well. According to one experienced observer, North Korea's four options consist of conducting a war, conducting a campaign of subversion against the South, reform, or trying to survive by

exploiting different sources of aid.⁵ Arguably, the North is currently pursuing the latter course of action, and will revert back to the subversion method if and when the rest of the world wises up.

SCENARIO 2: SOUTHERN-STYLE REUNIFICATION

For South Korea, the United States, and most of the rest of the world, the preferred scenario is a “soft landing” wherein an engagement policy coaxes North Korea along a path of reform to the point that it can be merged peacefully with South Korea.⁶ This is the tacit rationale behind South Korea’s “Sunshine Policy,” and explains why most US observers favor a policy of engagement towards North Korea. Officially, South Korean officials are careful to disclaim any intent to “absorb” North Korea, and in the wake of the June 2000 Summit President Kim Dae Jung cautioned that reunification would perhaps take twenty years to achieve.

Admittedly, North and South Korea have taken some significant steps towards rapprochement, particularly since the 2000 Summit. Over the years, humanitarian aid has been delivered in both directions across the DMZ,⁷ some family visits have been arranged, meetings have occurred between governmental officials, and modest joint business ventures have been developed. South Korea permitted the return of 80 “long-term prisoners” to the DPRK (without any reciprocal act by North Korea). Military clashes in the DMZ have become infrequent, with a consequent abatement of tensions, and the volume of propaganda has been reduced. It seemed that the joint appearance of North and South Korean athletes under a common flag at the 2000 Olympic opening ceremonies symbolized a new era that would soon see the unification of the two countries.

There is still a long way to go, however. The disappointing family visits thus far have been highly controlled, token media events. Hyundai’s Mount Kumkang tours, the centerpiece of inter-Korean business cooperation, continue to lose money. North Korea views the arrangement as a South Korean governmental responsibility, and continues to expect its payments. Although the ROK government has provided significant relief to the beleaguered Hyundai Corporation, it does not augur well for future joint ventures. Perhaps 500 South Koreans are held against their will in North Korea—prisoners from the Korean War or citizens such as fishermen who have been kidnapped by North Korean forces. North Korea refuses to acknowledge their presence and the South Korean government has thus far not pushed the issue.⁸

The 2000 summit and events that immediately followed it raised high expectations that momentum could be generated for reunification. If more ambitious steps can be taken, such as a return visit from Kim Jong Il to South Korea, more widespread and open family reunions, inter-

Korean mail service, completion of the inter-Korean railway, unhampered cross-DMZ broadcast of television and radio, and accountability for missing citizens, then perhaps a solid path to reunification can be institutionalized.

Finally, although a “soft-landing” reunification is the most desirable, it can be argued that a “hard-landing” scenario is more likely, and can occur in two ways. First, North Korea might remain isolated and eventually implode after conditions there continue to deteriorate. South Korea and perhaps others from the international community would then be faced with the task of picking up the pieces. Second, the implosion could ironically occur after North Korea opens up and its population become aware of what the real world is like. Under either “hard-landing” scenario, China might become the key facilitator if it is willing to provide bungalows-in-exile for the North Korean leadership.

SCENARIO 3: NORTHERN-STYLE REUNIFICATION

To the extent that relations between the ROK and DPRK continue to improve, and both countries pay homage to eventual reunification, an eventual stumbling block is that the North and South have vastly different views regarding the endstate. The two countries may have taken the first halting steps on the path to reunification, but they have greatly differing destinations in mind. It is simply a matter of time until these differences come to the fore. An indication of this is the difference in perspectives regarding why the June 2000 summit happened in the first place. To the South Koreans (and most of the world), the summit was due to President Kim Dae Jung’s visionary Sunshine Policy. North Koreans, however, reject the idea that President Kim Dae Jung deserves any credit; to them, the summit was exclusively the result of Kim Jong Il’s wise leadership and, particularly, the army-first policy.

North Korea has frequently emphasized its commitment to “three principles of reunification”⁹ and has continually stressed since the June 2000 summit that agreements made there should be rapidly implemented “to the letter.” There has since been a marked reduction in pronouncements about the illegitimacy of the South Korean state; instead, a benign concept of “one-nation, two systems” is presented. After Northern-style reunification, diplomacy and military affairs would be conducted at the national level, while unique social-political-economic systems would be maintained in the northern and southern portions of the new country. Functions such as law enforcement and education would be conducted at the local level.¹⁰

It is clear that the North Koreans believe the rightful overall leader of the reunified country would be their own Kim Jong Il; that North Korea has barely half the population of South Korea is irrelevant in their view. Indeed, there are fairly recent examples of a ruler originating

from a minor area (such as Hitler—an Austrian—who controlled greater Germany and Stalin—a Georgian—who ruled all of the USSR).

Skeptics should wonder how long the two separate systems would actually last under the North Korean scenario, if Kim Jong Il and his chosen entourage control the military and law enforcement functions are retained at the local level where, as in early Nazi Germany, North Korean cadres would ultimately triumph.

As the two Koreas continue along the path to engagement, rapprochement, and eventual reunification, it is important to understand that the North Koreans have a campaign plan in mind, which does not include any form of absorption or control by South Korea. With yet another touch reminiscent of Nazi Germany, North Korea has wrapped its Northern-style reunification campaign inside a highly nationalistic flag. Critics in the South are denounced as reactionary and treasonous against Korea as a whole, and this appears to be a key component of the North Korean campaign plan to achieve its version of peaceful reunification. Since the 2000 summit, criticism from North Korea appears to have resulted in the removal of some South Korean government officials, including the President of the Korean Red Cross.

Most observers outside of North Korea do not contemplate this scenario or, if they do, rate it as extremely unlikely. It is the North Korean's plan and expectation, however, and partially explains why the North has taken its limited steps toward engagement. Eventually, the North will almost certainly realize that this scenario is infeasible, and this realization will either generate a period of acute instability or will occur so late in the reunification game so to be irrelevant. On the other hand, there is at least a minuscule chance that North Korea's tenacity and party discipline will be able to see this scenario through, and there is a small radical minority in South Korea willing to do their part to assist. Should the North Koreans be successful, South Koreans can expect to lose the freedoms and prosperity they have grown accustomed to, and inherit a lifestyle more similar to that in the North.

SCENARIO 4: KOREAN WAR, PART II

The two most likely situations that would result in another Korean War are, first, a "death spasm" from North Korea's regime and, second, an unintentional escalation after an incident like so many that have occurred in Korea over the years. This is a marked change from earlier conditions. For most of the Cold War, North Korea's strategy was to wait for South Korea's "internal contradictions" to become acute, then to advance southward with military forces to stabilize the situation.

Arguably, from the DPRK perspective this is what was attempted in 1950, and after the Korean War the North entered a patient waiting game for another opportunity.¹¹ According to North Korean doctrine, this opportunity would be inevitable. However, any such window of opportunity was permanently closed, probably in the 1980s, as South Korea matured into a country that was politically, economically, and militarily strong. It became evident, even to the DPRK leadership, that South Korea is the stronger country and the gap between the countries only becomes wider. That the North Korean forces have lost every small-scale skirmish since 1983 is perhaps indicative of how a larger war would turn out. In the event of a conflict, most observers predict almost certain victory by ROK-US forces, while also acknowledging the likelihood of high casualties.

Still, no outcome is guaranteed and it is possible that North Korea could be successful in an attack on South Korea. More to the point, North Korea could miscalculate that its chances of success would be good. Surprise would likely be an advantage to the North, and its employment of up to a hundred thousand special operations forces could be a significant factor. Except for air power, the US would not be able to provide substantial military forces in the early stage of a war, particularly if the US is heavily committed elsewhere. South Korea has a high quality military, but it would be outnumbered and has some flaws such as an archaic commissioning system that results in a large number of officers who in effect are second-class citizens within the military. Structural weaknesses in CFC may prove to have a catastrophic impact; despite the annual exercises that are conducted in Korea, problems in areas such as terrain management and selected sustainment stocks have not been resolved.

Unlike in 1950, most of South Korea's mountains are now heavily forested, meaning that the predominately-infantry composition of North Korea's army would be difficult to target. Logistically, such a force would be able to "live off the land" as it advanced through South Korea. Strategically, South Korea's heavily populated capitol is close to the DMZ, with the potential of becoming 12 million hostages in the very early stage of a conflict. Refugees would severely hamper ROK-US operations, and CFC would undoubtedly attempt to minimize collateral damage. It is unlikely that the North Koreans would feel obliged to abide by such limitations, and its use of chemical and biological weapons is pretty much assumed as given.

North Korea would benefit from an active fifth column, an inevitable side effect of the democracy in South Korea. Conversely, a police state such as the DPRK will not be faced with such a challenge, absent an extremely strong destabilization effort by CFC which would pretty much have to be generated from scratch.

From the Iraqi perspective, plausible lessons learned from the Gulf War include the following: do not free hostages; do not allow the enemy time to build up a large force in theater; surprise is possible—do not give up the initiative once you have achieved it; use special operations forces; use weapons of mass destruction. It is reasonable to assume that North Korea has studied these lessons and will apply them to any future conflict. If the North Korean leadership faces the choice between certain collapse and a slim chance of wartime victory, it would rationally choose war.

SCENARIO 5: TWO FRIENDLY NATION-STATES

Korea has been divided since 1945, and this was after a 40-year period of Japanese subjugation. It is possible that too much time has elapsed ever to dissolve either the North or the South. It is difficult to envision that either national government would willingly fade out of existence, and after witnessing the difficulties experienced by Germany some South Koreans are having second thoughts about pursuing a costly reunification. The lines of demarcation in some form of confederation would be difficult to articulate. An alternative solution would be to retain two countries with a relationship similar to that between the US and Canada or, at most, between two states in the European Union.¹²

In this endstate both national governments would exist, the DMZ would disappear, and open travel between North and South would occur. The two Koreas might adopt integrative measures such as a common currency. Some would expect that this condition would result in a flood of immigrants to the South, but these tendencies might be obviated by investment opportunities that would capitalize upon the North's comparative advantages, specifically cheap labor, resources, and space to develop and build modern infrastructure.

US POLICY OPTIONS

US INTERESTS

In 1950, the main US interest in Korea was to defeat an invasion believed to have been orchestrated by the Soviet Union. Korea itself was not viewed as being significant; most Americans were unaware of this remote land. World War II was fresh in policy makers' minds, with the main lesson being that an aggressor should be stopped immediately. For a brief period after the Inchon landing *de facto* reunification seemed attainable, but after China's entry in the war the US settled for essentially the pre-war condition, in accordance with its Containment Strategy.

Today, US interests in Korea are markedly more varied. First, the US wants to prevent a direct attack on its own soil. As far as North Korea is concerned, this is a recent concern brought about by its missile and nuclear programs.¹³ However, this interest has long underpinned US actions vis-à-vis Korea because of a concern that any conflict, such as the Pueblo incident, could escalate into a conflict with the Soviet Union or China. By stationing thousands of American military personnel and their families in Korea, part of the American homeland is in effect transplanted into Korea, which makes the concept of extended deterrence plausible. Ballistic Missile Defense has been a rather contentious issue between the US and the ROK; Korea has been extremely reserved in expressing any support for the endeavor.

Second, and most compelling, the US wants to prevent an attack on a key ally. However alien Korea seemed to Americans in 1950, today Korea ranks with a handful of close friends like England and Canada for which Americans maintain a deep affection. This is due to many factors; for example, many Americans have been in Korea and the Korean-American population (if not as politically influential as, for example, Cuban-Americans) is one of the most respected minority groups in the United States.

Closely related to this is the desire to maintain stability on the peninsula and in the region, particularly to prevent a war from breaking out. The primary concern, of course, is a short-notice deliberate North Korean invasion, but any incident could result in unintended escalation.

Economically, the US is interested in thriving trade relations with South Korea and the other nations in Northeast Asia; all of whom save North Korea are among America's most important trading partners. US economic interest in North Korea is paltry, but this could change in the future if a reunified Korea results in investment opportunities in the North, development of resources in the North, rail access through China and Russia to Europe, and a Korean economy unhampered by vast military expenditures. Currently, the United States has the somewhat conflicting economic interests of ensuring that Korea's economic growth continues, while at the same time the US would prefer readier access to the Korean market.¹⁴

To varying degrees, the United States is interested in spreading democracy and otherwise fostering human rights. For many years after the Korean War, South Korea's authoritarian regimes engaged in questionable practices. For all the criticism that he received, former President Roh Tae Woo deserves credit for overseeing the ROK's transition to a full-fledged democracy, and this democracy has been institutionalized by subsequent presidents. In North Korea, the human rights situation is horrific, with widespread repression and concentration camps. Estimates of the number that have starved to death in the past decade

range from two hundred thousand to three million. Perhaps three hundred thousand refugees have left the country for China, where they fare little better and face arrest and deportation back to North Korea. This humanitarian calamity lurks in the background of any engagement attempts with North Korea, but as far as the US and South Korea are concerned is of secondary importance to North Korea's military threat.

Other interests that surface periodically include environmental issues, burdensharing and bilateral arrangements such as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and arms sales. Multinational operations such as East Timor and the Global War on Terrorism also reflect the convergence of American and Korean concerns.

MILITARY POLICY OPTIONS

The US military presence in Korea provides the most concrete evidence of America's continuing commitment to South Korea's defense against a North Korean attack, but it occasionally becomes a controversial issue that invites reassessment. The removal of US forces is an invariable staple of North Korean pronouncements, even though at the June 2000 summit Kim Jong Il reportedly agreed that the US presence provides regional stability and should continue after reunification.¹⁵ A minority of South Koreans is opposed to the US presence, but more believe that the US has its own reasons, besides the defense of the ROK, for remaining on the peninsula. Within the US, occasional voices argue for the reduction or withdrawal of American forces, but it generally speaking is not an issue that generates much controversy.

MILITARY OPTION 1: MAINTAIN DETERRENCE
MILITARY OPTION 2: RESTRUCTURE FOR REGIONAL STABILITY
MILITARY OPTION 3: US MILITARY WITHDRAWAL

TABLE 2. US MILITARY OPTIONS

About 37,000 American troops are stationed on the peninsula; about 15% of these are combat troops in the 2nd Infantry Division, 6th Cavalry Brigade, or in four Air Force fighter squadrons.¹⁶ Many of the remainder are in combat support or logistical units, but a large number are in the plethora of headquarters units. Several thousand American and Korean civilian servants also work in these headquarters. In the event of a war, the US would deploy numerous reinforcing units.

The American troop presence has been adjusted incrementally since end of the Korean, generally decreasing over time. In the future, three options exist: to maintain an Army-heavy deterrent force at essentially the present level; to restructure the force with more of an air-sea power projection character; or to withdraw US forces from the peninsula.

Military Option 1: Maintain Deterrence

The first alternative for US military presence in Korea is to maintain essentially the same levels of forces with the primary mission to deter war and fight victoriously if war breaks out. It can be argued that the current US presence is primarily a tripwire to ensure immediate US involvement in the event of a war. The ROK military is a high quality force, and very likely could win a war with North Korea even without significant US support. Nevertheless, the US forces provide an extra measure of certainty that North Korea would be defeated and, perhaps more importantly, makes it less likely that North Korea would initiate hostilities.¹⁷

	<u>Without US Presence</u>	<u>With US Presence</u>
Probability of War:	VERY LOW	LOWER
Probability of US Involvement:	HIGH	CERTAIN
Probability of Allied Victory:	HIGH	HIGHER

TABLE 3. WARTIME IMPACT OF US PEACETIME MILITARY PRESENCE

This option would permit marginal modifications as regards the types, locations, and missions of US forces that are stationed in Korea. For example, as the North Korean WMD threat grows additional Patriot or NBC units might be positioned on the peninsula. This approach would not prevent the redress of several overdue readiness deficiencies. Combined terrain management, Reception/Staging/Onward Movement/Integration (RSOI) planning, and planning for non-US UN forces are but a few of the areas that are in deplorable condition considering the many years that CFC has been able to prepare.

Additionally, it should be realized that the current situation should not be taken for granted by either the US or Korea. Relations have been strained by a number of negotiating issues such as SOFA, land usage (particularly ranges), the environment, Wartime Host Nation Support, compensation for wartime atrocities and other civilian casualties during the first Korean

War, and other issues. Either country may conceivably conclude that the current relationship is simply not worth the trouble, particularly if another Korean War is increasingly viewed as unlikely.

Even so, retaining current force levels is most likely because it minimizes the risk, however small, that is posed by North Korea.¹⁸ It should be realized that a North Korea *in extremis* might launch an attack even with a low probability of success, if it knows that the alternative is certain inevitable collapse of the regime. Additionally, retention of the current level of US forces is likely because of sheer organizational inertia;¹⁹ an organization's situation at t is best explained by knowing the situation at $t-1$, and its predicted situation at $t+1$ is best determined by knowing the situation at t .²⁰ Absent a popular demand in Korea that compels the US to leave (such as occurred in the Philippines and Panama), it is in the interest of both the US and Korea to have the US forces to remain.²¹

Military Option 2: Restructure for Regional Stability

A second approach would be to restructure the US forces drastically, and shift away from a ground-based force oriented on deterring or fighting a second Korean War. The overarching purpose, which would remain constant even after reunification, would be to have a forward base for a wide range of primarily small-scale contingencies and humanitarian operations. Arguably, the mere presence of US forces in the region could alleviate Korean-Japanese-Chinese-Russian power struggles that might otherwise occur; in particular, a regional nuclear arms race could unfold if the American card were absent.

A restructured force might consist of air assets at the current level but with increased intra-theater lift. A larger permanent naval presence might be established at one of Korea's ports, and US Army forces could be reduced to a small presence in the extreme southern part of the peninsula. Overall troop strength would be less than half of what it is now.²²

This approach acknowledges that the ROK is stronger than North Korea and is capable of preparing and conducting its own defense successfully. Even so, as long as any North Korean threat remains, US forces in Korea would still retain a wartime preparedness mission. However, the US contribution in the early weeks of the war would consist of air power—arguably, that is the situation today, notwithstanding the presence of the 2nd Infantry Division. Under the restructuring concept, the residual ground forces would provide the logistical toehold to support the later deployment of US reinforcements should they ever be needed.

An important implication is that such a restructuring might result in the dissolution of Combined Forces Command (CFC), which is the current warfighting headquarters for ROK-US

forces. Many Koreans have questioned why the commander of CFC is an American, when the ROK would provide the vast majority of combat forces particularly during the early stages of a conflict. A restructuring with a reduced American presence might result in an initial fight by ROK forces under ROK command, with a supporting US air effort, subordinate to US Pacific Command, directed against strategic and operational targets in North Korea. Logically, the future commander of US Forces Korea would be an Air Force general, most likely the Commander of 7th Air Force.

Radical restructuring concepts will likely not be entertained seriously in the near future, because of the same risk-averse incentives that tend to favor continuation of current US force levels. However, if Southern-style reunification appears more and more inevitable, such restructuring considerations will have to be explored. In order to reduce the permanent footprint, US forward presence on the peninsula could be satisfied by exercises, a visitation arrangement such as that with the Philippines, or US tenant units on ROK bases.

Military Option 3: US Military Withdrawal

Some would go farther than mere restructuring of US forces in Korea, and argue for their complete removal. In an era when the US military is over-committed and relies upon power projection from the homeland, any overseas basing should be reassessed. The US presence in Korea costs some \$5 billion annually and this may be an unnecessary expense. Moreover, the US may be close to overstaying its welcome in Korea.

The restructuring option discussed above retains most of the bureaucratic and legalistic problems associated with basing forces in foreign countries, and probably for very little benefit. Experience has shown that host nations frequently place limitations on the employment of US forces based on their soil. Hypothetically, there could be a future situation in which the US might desire to use Korean-based air forces to strike or intimidate Chinese forces, only to have Korea veto this use. There have been few if any instances of using Korean-based US forces for operations outside of Korea, so the US could probably be able to implement its future military strategy in Asia without a permanent presence on the peninsula. Indeed, the losses of Clark Air Force Base and the naval base Subic Bay in the Philippines hurt the US ability to project power in Asia far more than would the loss of the many little compounds that we currently occupy in Korea.

Finally, while conventional wisdom holds that the US military stabilizes the region, it seems farfetched to imagine that some combination of China, Japan, Russia, and a unified Korea would fight a war for some reason. Even if these countries found a reason worth

destroying their economic ties, not to mention their countries, is it really plausible that a small US force based in Korea would appreciably change matters?

Although a continued US presence in Korea, whatever the configuration, may seem to provide little tangible benefit of any type, it still serves as the aforementioned insurance policy. An objective calculation might favor the removal of US forces, particularly if such a measure could be used as a bargaining chip with North Korea, risk-averse policy makers in both Korea and the US will feel more comfortable if the forces remain. Public opinion in the US will be too tepid on this issue to affect the calculus; public opinion in Korea will likely be the determining factor in the future.

DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS

Military policy in Korea is, of course, closely linked to diplomatic and, to a lesser extent, economic policy. Broadly speaking, the US has five different policy tacks available.

- DIPLOMATIC OPTION 1: ISOLATION OF NORTH KOREA
- DIPLOMATIC OPTION 2: ENGAGEMENT
- DIPLOMATIC OPTION 3: DELEGATE TO SOUTH KOREA
- DIPLOMATIC OPTION 4: UNITED NATIONS
- DIPLOMATIC OPTION 5: WITHDRAWAL

TABLE 4. US DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS

Diplomatic Option 1: Isolation of North Korea

An extension of the Containment Strategy, this has been the approach utilized for most of the period since the Korean War. Some observers argue that it has been successful in weakening North Korea, and that it should be continued.²³ An important complement to this approach was the termination of widespread life support from the former Soviet Union; this crippled North Korea's economy and had a secondary effect of reducing life support from China, which no longer felt obliged to compete for geostrategic influence in North Korea. Consequently, North Korea has grown weaker, to the point that it struggles even to survive. Its remaining options are to "fish" for other "chumps" to provide life support to the regime, to rattle various sabers to obtain tribute, or to embark on a program of genuine reform. Hard-line skeptics in the ROK, the US, and elsewhere would argue that pressure should be maintained by continuing to isolate the DPRK regime. In their view, it would be foolish to provide the DPRK a

lifeline. At best, this merely delays the inevitable and at worst provides an incentive for North Korea to continue to engage in "blackmail."

Diplomatic Option 2: Engagement

This has been the dominant approach from South Korea and the US during the 1990s, but elements of this approach date back to Roh Tae Woo's *nordpolitik* efforts of the late 1980s. The debate as to whether to isolate or engage North Korea is in many respects reminiscent of that concerning US détente with the Soviet Union. Namely, does engagement make the adversary stronger, or will it entice the adversary towards reform? The dilemma for North Korea, of course, is that since it has long claimed that its system is perfect the regime is fairly obliged to eschew reform.

South Korea and the Clinton Administration opted for engagement following the WMD crisis of 1994, which resulted in the Agreed Framework to replace North Korea's graphite-based nuclear reactors with light water reactors. While the ROK's "Sunshine Policy" has been conducted with a view toward improving relations and laying the groundwork for future reunification, the US has been primarily interested in ameliorating North Korea's emerging missile and WMD threat.

William Perry's 2000 study of US policy toward North Korea concluded that engagement with North Korea was the only realistic option for the US, and that South Korea and Japan must closely link it to similar efforts.²⁴ While the Clinton Administration in its final stages wholeheartedly embraced the Perry Report, the Bush Administration initially distanced itself from the recommendations and has not pursued engagement with any sense of urgency. Predictably, North Korea also cooled toward the idea of engagement with the US and returned to earlier habits of condemning the US at every opportunity.

As US global attention focused on counter-terrorism following the September 11, 2001 attacks, North Korea initially was relegated to sideline status in the eyes of US policy makers, then characterized as a member of the pro-terrorist "axis of evil." Experience has shown that North Korea is never content to be ignored for long, nor does it remain docile when it is slighted. One can therefore expect that the DPRK will reenergize its missile and WMD programs in order to secure Washington's attention again; in other words, we can expect to see another North Korean long-range missile launch after its self-imposed moratorium expires in 2003.

Diplomatic Option 3: Delegate to South Korea

One of North Korea's central tenets since the Korean War is that the ROK government is illegitimate and should be marginalized.²⁵ The DPRK has consistently attempted to do this by dealing with the United States and bypassing South Korea. Ironically, this occurred again in the wake of the triumphal Korean summit. In the weeks following the summit, events seemed to proceed at breakneck speed: ministerial meetings, family reunions, cultural exchanges, etc. Inter-Korean momentum slowed considerably in October 2000 as North Korean officials began to prepare for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Pyongyang visit, a hoped-for precursor to a subsequent trip by President Clinton. Suddenly, North Korean diplomats were "too busy" to continue contacts with the South, and some events were even cancelled at short notice. Essentially, the US forced itself into the front seat of North Korean engagement, and the DPRK was only too happy to commence the dialogue. Seoul was for all practical purposes pushed into the shadows.

This was the situation for the final months of the Clinton Presidency. President Kim Dae Jung's meeting with President Bush in March 2001 resulted in another twist. In what is widely regarded as his worst foreign policy gaffe, President Bush cavalierly undercut Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy," rebuffed his own Secretary of State who had pledged continued engagement, and insulted North Korea. The Administration embarked upon a mysterious and tedious policy review which concluded, as had the Perry Report, that engagement with North Korea was the prudent option. Apologists attempted to put the best face upon the situation by suggesting that the US and South Korea in tandem could perform an effective "Good Cop, Bad Cop" routine in dealing with North Korea, but the damage was done and engagement suffered a severe relapse. President Bush's characterization of North Korea as a member of an "axis of evil" likewise dampened prospects for engagement, and was not favorably received by South Koreans who generally viewed the US as "throwing cold water" on rapprochement for its own cynical purposes (such as missile defense).

The US has had an historical tendency to display a short attention span in dealing with the Korean peninsula; when it does act it is prone to be spontaneous and heavy-handed. It might therefore be preferable to let South Korea take the lead in relations with North Korea and relegate the US to a clear supporting role. Any issues from the allies, whether they be economics, missiles, nuclear facility inspections, human rights, or conventional force confidence-building measures, would be addressed as South Korea sees fit. This would improve consistency and unity of effort, and would obviate North Korea's practice of playing its

adversaries off against each other. Certainly, South Korea has a keener interest and better expertise in ensuring that North Korea is handled properly.

For the US as well as Japan, the disadvantage of such an approach is that both countries would be positioned as convenient scapegoats which the two Koreas might habitually blame as they seek to reconcile their various differences.

Diplomatic Option 4: United Nations

The United Nations intervention in the Korean War was an early success for the international organization and the only real example of its kind. United Nations Command (UNC) is still an organization on the peninsula, but it pales in significance when compared to Combined Forces Command, and any new decisions of the Security Council would have minimal impact on UNC's activities. Its primary purpose is to secure contingency base access in Japan, which is guaranteed through the UN's actions in the early days of the Korean War.

A highly unlikely approach would be to resolve Korean issues in the United Nations and abide by decisions made there. While internationalists would laud such an effort, it is doubtful that any of the nations most interested in the Korean peninsula would allow the UN to dictate solutions.

Diplomatic Option 5: Withdrawal

Finally, the US might opt to divorce itself from the Korean peninsula and allow affairs there to evolve without American participation. If this occurs, it would most likely be due to isolationist tendencies that are usually not too deeply buried in the country's foreign policy. Americans are normally more concerned about their economy and domestic politics than international affairs. Tensions with South Korea, such as trade disputes, burdensharing disagreements, or acts of anti-Americanism, might prompt the US to terminate its involvement in Korea. Indeed, there is a growing sentiment in South Korea that would favor just that, and it is unlikely that either the American public or policy makers, particularly legislators, would tolerate widespread insults for long.

The US interests in Korea discussed earlier are strong enough, however, that it is unlikely the US will turn its back on Korean affairs. Likewise, most Koreans generally support the US involvement. Most will recall that the North Korea's 1950 invasion of the ROK was largely triggered by the US military withdrawal from Korea in 1949 and diplomatic statements about Korea being outside of the American security perimeter. Any US retrenchment should be

deferred until it is clear that North Korea understands that the ROK is capable of its own self-defense and decisive retaliation.

In general, though, complete US withdrawal from the peninsula is unlikely, even though American attention will frequently be riveted upon other regions or upon domestic concerns. The two countries have been able to reach an accommodation on most of the contentious issues between them, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

With the phenomenal success of the Korean economy, economic matters regarding Korea are increasingly important policy considerations. When South Korea had a fledgling economy, the US provided aid and tolerated protectionism so that growth conditions could be established. Now that Korea is an economic power American businesses are both concerned about the competition and interested in access to the Korean domestic market. From a policy perspective, the US can opt either to underwrite South Korea's economic strength or to campaign for an even economic playing field.

South Korea's economy suffered badly during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1999 because of two systemic economic problems. First, as in Japan, protectionism results in less competition in Korea's domestic market, which means that prices for various goods are inflated. This reduces consumer purchasing power, with a consequent drag on the economy. In order to protect jobs, however, South Korea is reluctant to lower trade barriers.

A second, and perhaps more significant, problem is the iron triangle between the large *chaebol* (business conglomerates), bureaucrats, and politicians. This has created inefficiencies and led to over-investing by the *chaebol* in questionable enterprises. When the International Monetary Fund bailed out the Korean economy, it insisted that the *chaebol* system be reformed. For that matter, such reforms were initially a priority of Kim Dae Jung's administration. Actual restructuring progress has been disappointing; it is interesting, however, that when Koreans refer to the economic difficulties of the late 1990s, most say that "the IMF problem" was to blame.

American economic options regarding North Korea relate to humanitarian aid and the relaxation of economic sanctions. Related to the latter is the State Department's continued inclusion of North Korea on the list of six nations that support terrorism. Most favor the continuation of humanitarian aid to alleviate North Korea's starvation and medical problems, even though such aid can either be diverted to the military or enable the North Koreans to

concentrate their own resources on the military. It might be worth structuring an aid program that includes an informal “bonus” clause to encourage cooperative behavior by North Korea.

Unfortunately, North Korea has probably determined that it is futile to try to earn any reward from the US. Since the Agreed Framework was signed, the promised relaxation of economic sanctions has been largely symbolic. Most would agree that North Korea was once a major instigator of terrorist atrocities, but for the past decade it has been quiescent in this regard. Measures such as sanctions and terrorist sponsor lists would be far more effective if they were turned on and off more responsively.

CONCLUSION

The alternative scenarios described in this study will be partially dependent upon future US policies, but other factors will also have an effect. These include South Korean domestic politics, decisions and actions by North Korea’s regime, American domestic politics, actions by China (and, to a lesser degree, Russia, Japan, and countries with whom North Korea has established ties) to name just a few. The future will likely be shaped by events, both intended and unintended, and their reverberations.

A distinct concern for United States policy makers is that the US might be lulled by nearly 50 years of sameness and miss the possibility that the situation in Korea is about to change significantly. It might yet be too early to implement major changes to the US military posture in Korea, but it is not too early to consider the specifics of changes in the not-too-distant future. The US stands to lose more than it has to gain if it is perceived as obstructionist regarding future developments on the peninsula.

Regardless of what happens with North Korea in the next few years, a changing of the guard is in effect slowly occurring in Korea. In the past, the US was clearly the dominant partner in the ROK-US relationship. Gradually, the relationship shifted to a more balanced one between partners—figuratively at first, and then increasingly in substance. The trend is, and should be, to graduate to a ROK-dominant relationship. The ROK will always have a stronger incentive than the US to manage the security situation on the Peninsula to perfection, and it will soon have the capability to do so independently, if it does not already.

It is therefore quite appropriate for the ROK and US to begin managing the transition effectively, with the US assuming more of a supporting role as the ROKs take the lead. This includes a gradual restructuring of the US military presence to a posture commensurate with a regional stability role, and support for ROK diplomatic initiatives and sanctions regarding North Korea. This approach would be in keeping with a global US grand strategy to avoid “imperial

overstretch" by relying more heavily upon allies who are regional powers.²⁶ Moreover, it would be the culmination of a fifty-year process that turned South Korea into the vibrant democracy it is today. Far from being a symbol of US retreat, such a transition is really a testament to a mission successfully accomplished.

WORD COUNT = 8,517

ENDNOTES

¹ See Chuck Downs, *Over the Line: North Korea's Negotiating Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 1999) for an insightful analysis and history of negotiations with North Korea, from the Korean War to the 1994 Agreed Framework. For an early account of negotiations with North Korea, see Admiral C. Turner Joy, *How Communists Negotiate* (Santa Monica, CA: Fidelis Publishers, Inc., 1970) which documents Turner's experience as chief UN negotiator at Panmunjom during the Korean War.

² From June 2000 (the North-South Summit) until March 2001 (when President Bush gave North Korea the cold shoulder), Japan was the target of most of North Korea's vitriolic propaganda. See Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) archives at <<http://www.kcna.co.jp>>. Internet.

³ See, for example, Kim Myong Chol, "Kim Jong Il's Military Strategy for Reunification," *Comparative Strategy* 20, no. 4 (2001): 411-413.

⁴ Downs and Joy, among others, have documented the intractable negotiating style of the North Koreans. Some suggest this characteristic is reflective of Koreans in general. For an appreciation of Korean cultural influences, see Donald Stone MacDonald, *The Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society* (Third Edition, edited and revised by Donald N. Clark) (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 68-111.

⁵ Stephen Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy" in *Planning for a Peaceful Korea*, ed. Henry D. Sokoloski (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), 31-32.

⁶ For an optimistic forecast, see Selig Harrison, "Time to Leave Korea?" *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2001): 62-78.

⁷ In 1984, for example, North Korea offered humanitarian relief to South Korea after devastating floods. South Korea accepted, and the North-South rice exchange occurred in the DMZ amidst a spate of good will.

⁸ The issue of repatriation of South Koreans held captive by the North seems destined to emerge eventually as an intractable point of negotiation between the two countries.

⁹ These principles are independent reunification, peaceful reunification, and great national unity. The DPRK's interpretation of these principles entails the US out of Korea; a militarily weak ROK; and no dissent against the North Korean view, while dissidents and subversives in South Korea will be given free reign. Bradner, 42.

¹⁰ See Kim Myong Chol, esp. 412-414 for a recent North Korean vision of reunification.

¹¹ Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 1999), 29-34.

¹² In some ways, Taiwan and China are further along in this direction, with high levels of trade and frequent visitation. This relationship may ironically be an initial model for the two Koreas.

¹³ See Anthony H. Cordesman *Proliferation in the "Axis of Evil": North Korea, Iran, and Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002), 1-9. Indications are that North Korea has weapons-grade plutonium and is close to developing the two-stage Taepo Dong-2 missile that could reach western parts of the United States with a small payload. If a third is added, the missile conceivably could range all of the United States. Although the DPRK has not conducted any test flights since it launched a missile over Japan in August 1998, it has continued with other missile-development activities.

¹⁴ As of this writing, contentious issues between the US and Korea include exports of Korean steel to the US and exports of American automobiles to Korea.

¹⁵ Although President Kim Dae Jung has frequently stated that Kim Jong Il agreed in principle to the retention of US forces in Korea after reunification, North Korea's media continue to demand the withdrawal of US forces. It is possible that, at the 2000 Summit, Kim Jong Il was simply trying to be polite to Kim Dae Jung, if he truly believes the latter to be a "lackey" who would be obliged to make such a statement on behalf of his American "masters."

¹⁶ By counting estimated numbers of tank crews, infantry squads, aircraft crews, etc., one can determine that there are roughly 4,000 American personnel in Korea who are actually "combat troops."

¹⁷ The last Korean War occurred after the US had withdrawn two divisions that had been based in Korea following the Second World War.

¹⁸ This is the general conclusion of Sokolski, *Planning for a Peaceful Korea*.

¹⁹ Harrison also indicts the military-industrial complexes in both Korea and the US, 66.

²⁰ Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1971), 91.

²¹ This tends to be the conclusion of most studies written by either current or former members of the US military. See, for example, General John H. Tilelli and Major Susan Bryant, *Northeast Asian Regional Security: Keeping the Calm* (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, 2002), 42-43.

²² One such approach is suggested in Michael O'Hanlon, "US Military Force Structure after Korean Reunification," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analyses* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 213-228.

²³ Eberstadt, for example, contends that it would be preferable not to postpone the "end of North Korea" by giving it life support.

²⁴ William J. Perry, "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations" (Washington D.C.: US Department of State, October 12, 1999).

²⁵ See, for example, Kim Myong Chol, 411-413.

²⁶ The East Timor model, wherein the US and other countries chipped in support for the Australian lead and main effort, illustrates this approach.

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